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THE DECLINE OF THE RURAL POPULATION

An Abstract of the Papers and Discussion. For a full Report see the Publications of the American Statistical Association.

PROFESSOR HIBBARD said that the alarm over the decrease of the rural population is neither new nor local. Classic writers lamented the same tendency in Greece and Rome, and early in the modern period, in both France and England the same preference for city over country was pointed out by numerous writers. Even in America the tendency has been going on at least since the Civil War, and in Iowa it began about a decade later. At the present time, France, England, and Germany are all facing the same problem.

The decline in the rural population is not primarily due to a decrease in the size of families, though this has something to do with it. It is primarily due to the greater attractiveness of the cities. Moreover, the city is calling for more workers, the country is learning to get along with fewer.

There are two main sections where the decline in the rural population is marked: (1) New England and northern and western New York and a part of Pennsylvania; (2) a large section of the Middle West, extending, roughly from Columbus, Ohio, to Lincoln, Nebraska, and from St. Paul to St. Louis. In the first of these sections the decline in rural population is accompanied by a decline in general agriculture, there being fewer cattle, horses, swine, and sheep, also fewer acres of grain and hay than formerly. The number of farms is decreasing and their average size is increasing, as is also the value of farm implements during the last decade, though there had been a decrease before. In the second named section, however, there has been no general decline, but a general advance of agriculture, and the value of the average farm has doubled in the last ten years. But the decrease in the number of rural workers is compensated for by the more effective use of machinery and the increase in the number of horses per farm. Within the memory of men still working on the farms of this section, the amount which a man can plow in a day has risen from one acre to five, through the improvement in the plows and the increase in the number of horses in the team. Through corresponding improvements, the amount of corn he can cultivate in

a day has risen from three or four acres to fifteen or twenty. With the modern self-binder two men can cut, bind, and shock as much wheat per day as eight men could at the close of the Civil War.

In Illinois, the number of horses has increased 13 per cent during the last ten years; in Iowa 13.7 per cent.

It is rather striking to note that wherever in this section farm lands have risen to the highest prices, there population has fallen most.

DR. CANCE said that in New England it is difficult to tell from the census just what the strictly rural population is or has been at any census period. A great many small mill towns have less than 2500 inhabitants. Though they are classed as rural, practically none of these people are engaged in agricultural or outdoor pursuits. A special study of some of the towns of western Massachusetts reveals the fact that the strictly rural part of the population,—that is, they who get their living from the soil—is still diminishing where it has not already reached the vanishing point. Here, the greatest exodus is from the less fertile, or the more isolated sections. Though there may be many minor causes, the primary and enduring cause is the unremunerative and disagreeable character of farm work. The depopulation can be checked, (1) by a reorganization of agriculture, so as to increase the farmer's income and reduce the severity of his labor, (2) by filling the country with a class of people whose standard of living is lower and who are accustomed to hard and unremunerative toil. But the immigrants seem to prefer the valley farms where specialized agriculture by hand methods can be carried on, and they show little liking or adaptability for the hill farms. Contrary to general belief, the males exceed the females by from 5 to 12 per cent in the hill towns. Neither the development of small farms, nor the country homes of city families has made much impression upon the census statistics.